

# Drash for Shabbat Beha'alotcha by Elissa Schirmer Erly

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Clouds, Plagues and Black Lives Matter

There are times when it seems hard to connect a Torah reading with what is going on in the modern world. When I started reading the description of the purification of the Levites, I was concerned that Beha'alotcha was going to be one of those readings. However, as it turns out, I could not have been more mistaken.

Over the past week, Tucson has been blessed with late afternoon and evening cloud cover...and some parts of town were even lucky enough to get some rain. Clouds and rain are unusual at this time of year, giving them somewhat of a miraculous feeling. I was reading Beha'alotcha during a particularly cloudy and fiery colored sunset this week when I came upon Numbers 9:15: "On the day the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Pact; and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until morning."

In the Torah, images of clouds and fire in the sky are symbols of God's presence and power. In Beha'alotcha, the clouds are also a symbol of God's protection as the Israelites wandered in the desert: "And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot that the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. (Numbers 9:17)"

For a while, all seemed to go well on the journey until the Israelites once again began to bemoan leaving Egypt, this time because of their bland daily diet of manna. When they were gifted with meat, they became gluttonous and angered God once again: "The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. (Numbers 11:33)" People died and were buried before the Israelites could continue on their journey.

Now I do not believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a punishment from God. However, it is hard to hear the words "plague" and 'died' without thinking about our current situation. Later in the parashah, Miriam angers God who, once again, makes his presence known by arriving and departing in a cloud. Miriam is stricken with a covering of snow-white scales and shut out of camp for seven days...the conditions of disease and social isolation that has, sadly, become so familiar today.

What did Miriam do to deserve such a punishment? "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married. 'He married a Cushite woman.' (Numbers 12:1)." So why is the fact that Moses' wife is a Cushite mentioned twice? And why isn't Tziporah mentioned by name as the woman that Moses married? The Cushites were from Cush, south of Ethiopia and known for their black skin. So rather than seeing Tziporah as Moses' wife, a person who mattered, Miriam and Aaron saw only the color of her skin, the symbol of her 'otherness.'

This week's reading Parashat Beha'alotcha could not be timelier. If only racial prejudice could be so easily cured with seven days of isolation.

Shabbat Shalom.